



Whitted Bowers Farm

I visited in Whitted Bowers Farm in 2008, just a year after the farm had started. The long driveway crossed a huge open space, flanked with dirt-covered fields just waiting for their time to come. Rob and Cheri Bowers had bought the land only two years earlier. The couple met at a film festival: within minutes, they were talking excitedly about biodynamic fruit. Neither had farmed full-time, but both had experience on farms; Cheri had done some relevant coursework,

and Rob had grown four acres of organic table grapes.

Cheri's family (the Whitteds) had farmed in North Carolina for seven generations, so the Bowers moved back from California and began their fruit farm. They started an experimental orchard to see what would grow well: mayhaws, juneberries, rosehips, autumn olives, cold-hardy citrus, heirloom apples, peaches, plums, figs, persimmons, and even a pomegranate tree stood in the ground around the house. The lone pear tree was taken down by a beaver, who, thankfully, had since moved on.



For their first year, they planted four acres

of muscadine grapes, all of which were killed in 2007's April freeze.

Neighbors told Rob it was the worst time he could have chosen in fifty years to plant grapes. Needing something to sell for the 2007 season, the Bowers turned to annuals and planted heirloom melon seeds. The melons thrived in the drought, filling the Bowers' house as they tried to sell them all at the Farmers' Market in Hillsborough. "The whole market smells like melons!" other farmers told them; Rob became known as "the Melon Guy."



Cheri showed me pictures of the melons, which are European varieties: these are not your average melons.

With names like the Prescott Fond Blanc and the Charentais, they looked like they'd been lifted straight out of a

Renaissance still-life. The outsides were bumpy and pale yellow, or green and yellow striped; inside, many resembled cantaloupe. Getting heirloom seeds was hard; now the Bowers save seeds for the future.

Melons are known for being fussy and high-maintenance; if it's not a drought year, they often have trouble with fungus on the plants. This is where biodynamic preps come in. In the Bowers' huge blue mixing bowl, sprays can be made with natural ingredients (like seaweed, nettles, or chamomile) to treat the plants for different conditions. The huge mixer creates a vortex in the prep, then stops and destroys the form as it begins to spin in the opposite direction. Rob spoke of putting energy and love into the mixtures, getting beyond the simple mechanical motion of the mix.

The preps are one part of biodynamic farming, which Rob dubbed "uber-organic." The other part has to do with when seeds are planted: the moon and planets affect the earth and cause good and bad times for planting different types of plants. Planting schedules can be found in the form of almanacs.

Just past the mixer was the new greenhouse, in which the Bowers start their melons and keep cuttings of their strawberries and grapes. They plan to produce all their own plants. They have two ponds for irrigation and plan to build a water catchment system for their house's huge roof. They added a barn and a packing shed, where the harvested melons could live, instead of piled throughout their house. Bags of "starting mix" lay waiting; the Bowers cooperated with neighboring farms to buy the bags in quantity.



After the greenhouse we passed through the young orchard to the chicken coop, where a rooster crowed from the roof of the henhouse. I was taken in by a poofy-headed chicken, who scratched around with the other, usual kinds of chickens, unaware of her spectacular hairdo. The Bowers will increase their livestock as a way to generate the farm's fertility; they also hope to function as a livestock rescue someday.



Past the chicken coop were the strawberry fields. Rows of round leafy-green clumps stretched across the ground. At the back was a row of table grapes, and beyond were a hundred blackberry and blueberry bushes, all of which showed great growth for two years. The Bowers didn't want to go all-out with their blueberries, since their neighbor runs a U Pick blueberry farm; but they recognize the need for blueberries in the area and are keeping it in mind. They

also hope to add pecans, black walnuts, and hazelnuts someday, and an heirloom pumpkin patch. They talk to customers to get ideas and don't mind trying new or risky plants; and they're determined to do it all organically.

Whitted Bowers Farm has prospered since my initial visit, becoming famous for their biodynamic U-pick strawberry field in addition to their melons. You can usually visit them on the Piedmont Farm Tour in April. If the winter is mild, the strawberries might be ready in time! Visit their website, <http://www.whittedbowersfarm.com>.